

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Giants: *Trusting Death and Rebirth*

— Odin's Mentor —

Nine lays of power I learned
from the famous son of Bolthor,
father of Bestla

These few lines of sacred poetry allude to, in the sparest of shorthands, one of the central aspects of Odin's fantastic voyage of discovery to the Lowerworld: his journey to the Well of Wisdom, where he was taught the Nine Spells of Power. To understand the nature and significance of these spells we need to know the identity of his teacher, the mentor he refers to as 'the famous son of Bolthor, father of Bestla'.

At the beginning of time 'there was nothing but the Yawning Gap', says Snorri Sturluson. He describes a state of suspended power in which, before the cosmos was formed, there were two immense polarities of fire and frost.¹ Muspellheim was a region of pure heat and flame, raging, burning; Niflheim, freezing fog, was deep chill, locked, bound, creaking cold. These two mighty forces held each other in balance. The space between them was Ginnungagap, highly charged, explosive energy. This was the ancient European version of our Steady-State Universe.

And then came the Big Bang. In one fateful instant, the two mighty polarities intersected. Fire and frost exploded into each other's domain. In the yawning gulf between the formerly separate fire and frost realms, in Sturluson's words: 'where the freezing met the livid heat it melted and dripped away. From the fermenting drops fusing to life by virtue of the power which threw up the heat, there was shaped the likeness of a man. He is called Ymir.' But Ymir, though in the form of a man, was not human. He was huge, for the ice had melted

into giants. Enormous giants, as big as mountains. Possibly they are ancestral memories of Ice Age glaciers; ice giants moving only a few feet each year, their immense footprints leaving tracks the size of valleys and gorges shaping the contours of the Earth's skin.

But the concept was even bigger than this. For out of the material being of this first giant was formed the entire world as we know it. Sturluson quotes from *Grimnismal*, one of the poems of the *Elder Edda*, which is in the form of a monologue by Odin:

Out of Ymir's flesh was the earth fashioned
and from his gushing gore the seas;
mountain tops from his bones
trees from his hair,
heavenly sky from his skull.

Then out of his brows the joyous gods built
Midgard for the sons of men;
and from his brains there burgeoned all
the soul-encompassing clouds.²

As the Earth was created other human forms appeared, some as people, others giant-sized. One of the humans was Buri, who had a son called Bor. A giant called Bolthor had a daughter named Bestla. Bor and Bestla had a child. This child was Odin.

These ancestral trees, important still as recently as in the Russian novels of Tolstoy, were central to the people of Wyrd. In ancient European life the awareness of generations within families established an identity, webs of influence, channels of life force and power, bonds biologically based and expressed through families, clans and tribes. In the fragment of Odin's family tree outlined above, the 'famous son of Bolthor, father of Bestla' was the brother of Bor, and so Odin's uncle. And the name of Odin's uncle, his mentor, the teacher of 'nine lays of power', the driving force behind his initiation, was the wise giant Mimir, a figure referred to in the most ancient of myths and sagas.³

For men, uncles were important in early European culture. The uncle, a related, older figure, who had known the young man since birth but had no direct hand in his upbringing, was considered to be ideally placed to introduce the adolescent into manhood. And in the

case of Odin, where we are witnessing the transformation of manhood into shamanhood, his uncle presided over the transformation of qualified initiates.

The sequence of events for Odin comprises first of all, as we have seen, his climbing into a tree for a nine-night vision quest. But then, from all the stories available to him but lost to us, Snorri Sturluson tells us that 'Under the root that turns in the direction of the Frost Giants lies the Spring of Mimir.' The root to which he refers is one of the three great sources of the World Tree. The spring contains secrets, deep reservoirs of wisdom which form part of Odin's quest. Snorri tells us that in the spring is 'hidden wisdom and understanding; Mimir is the name of the owner of the spring. He is full of wisdom because he drinks from the spring out of the horn Gjoll.' Odin's initiatory quest is to obtain a drink of water from Mimir's well.⁴

Eliade says that shamanic ritual, timeless in its aim, form and content, always seeks to return the participant to Original Time, the sacred point at which man was in communication with all other beings, and before he became separated from the animals and plants. In his initiation, when Odin journeys from the tree to the Lowerworld, to the Well of Mimir, and asks Mimir for a drink from the spring, he is asking to taste the forces of the very creation of the cosmos. For Mimir's spring is formed from the mist of the cosmic realm of Ginnagap – the charged, primeval creative energy that exploded into life as the Mist of Creation when the frost and the fire came together.

It is intriguing to imagine this wisdom residing within the primeval forces of the cosmos. Not in our minds. Not in our libraries, our scientific laboratories, or our computer banks. Truth not in our hands, but in the Earth's forces. Out there, in the dynamic energies of creation, condensed in deep pools of wisdom.

— Riding Sleipnir to the Otherworld —

Odin soared from the World Tree and flew on Sleipnir in initiatory ecstasy to encounter Mimir, the wisdom giant. We do not have a direct account of this ride, but there are several accounts of later jour-

neys Odin took on Sleipnir; they give us a flavour of what this first journey must have been like.

One of the rides on Sleipnir was taken by the god Hermothr, whom some scholars think to be an alter ego of Odin. Since my purpose in telling you the details of Hermothr's ride is to afford a glimpse of the nature of Odin's journey to Mimir, I shall therefore refer to Sleipnir's rider here directly as Odin. He was on this occasion riding from Asgard, in the Upperworld, down to Hel, the deepest realm of the Lowerworld in search of information about his brother Balder. He mounted his shamanic spirit-horse Sleipnir, and galloped from Asgard.⁵

Odin surged and fell as the mighty World Tree bucked beneath him, and looking down he saw that it was now a horse: a magnificent, huge, white, eight-legged horse, its hooves kicking and sparking for the gallop through the heavens. He bent over the horse's neck – Sleipnir it was called, he knew – and gripped with both hands hanks of the flowing mane as they shot off into the night sky. The flash of stars soon turned to a twinkle of dew as Sleipnir's hooves struck rock and they rode towards a mountainside, and the dark, looming entrance of an enormous cave.

The sources describe how, to commence the journey, Odin had to get into a cave black as night, set among precipitous cliffs and ravines. This black cave, a magical entrance to the sacred geography of the Lowerworld, rather like the dark room of a journey into deep hypnosis, a state of mind of total, cocooned concentration, was the destination, but to get into the cave was an ordeal, because the entrance was guarded by a fearsome hound called Garmr. The huge dog had blood on his chest; if the dog Kerberos from Greek mythology is a parallel, then the blood is from the dead people who have tried to escape from Hel, the deepest level of the Lowerworld.

While the Lowerworld was a realm of wisdom, for it contained the collective knowledge of all people who have lived and died, it was important in the finely balance web of forces that these 'spirits of the dead' remained in the Lowerworld, only escaping into the world of the living at liminal points in the year: Hallowe'en, Midwinter's Eve and so on. And in the mythology of the people of ancient Europe, the

end of the world would be marked by setting the hound free, leaving the way out of Hel unguarded – the dead come roaring back into the world of the living: entropy exploding.⁶ So Odin has to get past Garmr by the use of charms, or runic spells; presumably bonding spells such as I introduced in the earlier discussion about the threads of Wyrd being tied into ethereal knots; the dog is thus bound by magical forces (as was Fenrir the wolf), and Odin can slip inside.

Odin reined in Sleipnir by pulling at the mane, but the horse was already hopping sideways and slithering on the rocks to give Garmr a wide berth. Odin knew some binding charms, which he chanted over the baying hound, and the dog became constricted in its movements. It tried to bite at invisible bonds, then lost its footing, and was soon trussed up and helpless. Odin urged Sleipnir into the cave before the spell wore off and the dog could chase after them.

The high-roofed cave went deep into the mountain, and as they rode into the darkness even the glow of Sleipnir's coat faded like a dying candle. On they rode, until finally the cave opened out on the other side, a mere pinprick of light at first, getting larger, and then out into moonlight. The air smelled different: cooler, wetter; they were on their way to the Lowerworld.

'He rode nine days and nights down ravines ever darker and deeper, meeting no one,'⁷ say the lines of sacred poetry; he is travelling the same magical time as he stayed in the World Tree; perhaps his journey began the moment his initiatory fast began. Descending trails along the floor of deeper and darker ravines, he was now entering the Lowerworld proper, the Realm of Shadows.

'Until he came to the banks of the river called Echoing.' The river is an important boundary, a great, open, echoing space blocking progress, testing one's will to cross. And there is only one way for Odin to cross the surging flow of Echoing space – over a bridge: 'this bridge is roofed with burning gold.'⁸ The bridge of burning gold is like other references to a magical bridge which links the realm called Bifrost, which is also a bridge of fire and gold.

At the entrance to Echoing Bridge there is a mysterious maiden called Mothguthr who guards the bridge. She asks him his name or lineage, saying only the day before five droves of dead men had

padded over the bridge, 'but the bridge echoed less under them than under thee'. 'Anyway,' she said, realising he was not dead but some sort of a shaman journeying in the realms of the dead, 'you haven't the pallor of a dead man; why are you riding down Helway?'

Odin tells her the reason for his trance journey, explaining that he was seeking the soul of a god called Balder. 'You don't happen to have set eyes on Balder on the road to Hel?' He was in luck. She replied that Balder had already ridden over the Echoing Bridge, and 'the road to Hel lies down still and to the north.'

Odin urged Sleipnir past the woman and thundered over the bridge to the other side, the horse's eight hooves drumming on the path Helway, and galloped on until they came to Hel Gate, an enormous barrier. Odin slid off his shamanic horse and tightened the girth. 'He mounted again and raked his spurs along the animal's ribs. The stallion leapt so high there was plenty of twilight between him and the bars.'⁹

From here the shaman rode on to the hall where resided the Queen of Hel. At the Hall of Hel he dismounted and went in to see 'his brother Balder sitting on a throne'. He had completed his journey.

Of course, in exploring Odin's journey to his initiation, he had a different destination: he was heading for an encounter with Mimir. The journey may have been slightly different, because Mimir lived next to a Well of Wisdom by one of the three roots of the World Tree. But since the roots sink to depths beyond anyone's understanding, they must be deep. I imagine the atmosphere, the obstacles, the time frame (nine nights and nine days) to be similar to Odin's journey into the Lowerworld.

While we may explore Odin's visions for their own sake, in the sacred stories of the ancient tribespeople of Europe his initiation was considered primary: it set the pattern for all initiations to follow. And it is remarkable that a description by Eliade of a recent shamanic ritual in Siberia has such strong parallels to that established in the story of Odin.¹⁰

Here the shaman is searching for the lost soul of a sick client; his task is to find and recover it, returning it to its owner: 'At the end of such a seance the shaman gave Jochelson the particulars of his ecstatic journey,' writes Eliade. Accompanied by his helping spirits, he had

followed the road that leads to the Kingdom of Shadows. He came to a little house and found a dog that began to bark. An old woman, who guarded the road, came out of the house and asked him if he had come for ever or for a short time. The shaman did not answer her; instead, he addressed his spirits: 'Do not listen to the old woman's words, walk on without stopping.'

Soon they came to a stream. There was a boat, and on the other bank the shaman saw tents and men. Still accompanied by his spirits, he entered the boat and crossed the stream. He met the souls of the patient's dead relatives, and, entering their tent, found the patient's soul there too. 'As the relatives refused to give it to him, he had to take it by force. To carry it safely back to earth, he inhaled the patient's soul and stuffed his ears to prevent it from escaping.'

The road leading into darkness, the 'Kingdom of Shadows', the little house (cave) where he encountered a dog which barked at him, the woman who guarded the route who challenged him, the crossing of a stream (this time in a boat rather than over a bridge), and finally arriving at the land of the spirits of the dead: the similarities demonstrate remarkable parallels between the details of journeys separated by so many centuries, and the timeless quality of these rituals.

— The Giants —

The land of the giants was called Jotunheim, one of the nine worlds of knowledge in the World Tree. It was a world on an enormous scale, as befits its residents, a landscape of towering forests, strong rivers, vast caverns, mighty mountains and tremendous distances. When the god Thor went to Jotunheim: 'Thor and his companions saw soaring high above them a castle set in the middle of an open plain. Even though they pressed back the crowns of their heads on to the napes of their necks they still couldn't see its battlements.'

The giants were the first forms of life which were shaped from the coming together of fire and frost, at the creation of the cosmos. They were then possessed of huge elemental powers. Cleverer beings, like dwarfs and humans, have come along since and elaborated the world, but the basic structure, dynamics, bases of life were in the hands of the

giants. This is a kind of brute wisdom. Knowledge from the beginning.¹¹

Both good and evil giants are depicted in myth all over ancient Europe, ranging from helpful, relatively harmless creatures like larger versions of household and farmyard elves to hideous ogres, eaters of human flesh. 'Ent' is an Old English word meaning 'giant', and usually referring to an ancient fallen race of wise and faithful giants whose passing was spoken of regretfully in the *Prose Edda*. On the other hand, in ancient Teutonic myth, giants and trolls were often personifications of natural elements in their most terrifying forms. Aegir and his wife Ran, for example, were Scandinavian giants who represented the violence of the sea. Other giants were responsible for the growls and roars in river chasms, for earthquakes and for thunderstorms. The elemental forces they embodied constituted the very fabric of the world we inhabit.

In northern mythology the giants are images which embody complex nuances of significance within an animistic interpretation of natural phenomena. Rockfalls, landslips and earthquakes were the work of rock giants; flaring volcanoes, destructive lightning, and the frightening northern lights were caused by fire giants; and avalanches, glaciers, ice-caps, freezing seas and rivers by ice or frost giants.

The wisdom of the giants emanated from their intimate connections with the elements of nature. The god Thor (called Thunor in England),¹² who was as prominent as Odin in some areas of western Europe and Scandinavia, was a large, bluff, farmer's god. The god of thunder, he wielded a big hammer as weapon, and his main role in the delicate web of forces which held together the cosmos was to fight the giants, to keep them penned in their kingdom, and dissuade them from invading the realm of the gods; to keep the elements under control.

On one of his sojourns into the land of the giants, he came upon the mead hall of the mightiest giant of all, banged on the doors, and asked for hospitality.¹³ The Thunderer was not shy. 'I admit to my hall only those who are masters of some trial,' boomed the giant, his lips curling into a sneer. 'What can a puny individual like you hope to achieve against my giant warriors?'

Thor could not resist such a challenge, though he knew he would

be up against it. These were seriously big giants. His brow furrowed in thought for a moment. 'There is no one in your hall can eat faster than I!' he retorted, pulling himself up to his full height and almost reaching the kneecap of the giant.

The giant admitted Thor to his hall, and called for an enormous trencher of meat to be brought in. Thor sat down at one end and a giant warrior at the other, and they both ate as fast as they could. Thor crammed the meat into his mouth and swallowed without chewing (he was not a very elegant god); they met in the middle of the trencher and Thor thought he had at least matched the giant for speed of eating. But then he saw that while he had left only the bones of his meat, the giant had eaten all his meat, bones and his side of the trencher as well. Thor had lost the contest.

But Thor was not finished. He valiantly challenged any giant in the hall to a drinking contest. The giants stopped laughing long enough to drag out an enormous ale-horn, fill it, and challenged the Thunderer to empty it. Thor's eyes popped as he took three immense draughts, until he thought he would explode, but the horn was not emptied. The giants were helpless with mirth at Thor's efforts.

Our hero stood up to them, his eyes blazing, feet astride: 'Now I am really angry!' he shouted. 'I will show you how strong I am. I challenge any of you to a wrestling match.' When he heard himself say this, Thor felt a slight twinge of doubt, but he quickly conquered it. He had a mighty heart, full of optimism and self-belief. He would try to his utmost. As he pumped himself up as big as possible, the giants seemed to be dithering over who should wrestle with him.

But then an old crone shuffled into the arena, and the giants roared their approval; Thor would wrestle with her. He tried to object, furious that the ignorant huge ones would impugn his dignity so, but as he was remonstrating with them, the crone suddenly started grappling with him. She was surprisingly strong, and although Thor tried with all his strength, he could struggle only evenly with the old woman and eventually she threw him to the ground.

The Thunderer felt humiliated. Slowly he climbed to his feet, and crept towards the door, his head hung in shame. But as he reached for the latch, the mighty giant called him back.

'Wait! Noble One, had I known you were so powerful I would have never admitted you to my hall, for I would have been afraid of you.'

Thor thought the giant was mocking him, but when he turned he saw that all the giants were regarding him with respect. 'How can that be?' he asked. 'I lost all three contests.'

'Yes,' said the giant, 'but you did not realise who it was you were contesting. You first competed for eating speed with Wildfire itself, which can consume entire forests at one sitting.' Thor took a step back into the hall. 'And the enormous drinking horn had been connected to the oceans, and in each of your three draughts, you lowered the level of the sea by one inch.' The giants were nodding and smiling in approval.

'But the old crone?' said Thor. 'She threw me to the ground.'

The Mighty Giant laughed. 'She was your most formidable opponent, for she who threw you to the ground was Old Age herself. She defeats us all eventually!'

Most of us are, at times, too hard on ourselves. We take on too much, expect too much. It is easy when we succeed, because the rewards are self-evident. But when we attempt something ambitious and feel that we have failed, it is good to be sure to give ourselves credit for at least making the challenge. Sometimes our failures are more impressive than our successes; it all depends with what we were competing.

So when Odin arrived at the Well of Mimir the Giant, at the root of the World Tree, he was dealing with an old, huge and *wise* being.

— What Odin Wanted From Mimir —

Odin's ultimate quest was to obtain a drink of 'magic mead', but first he needed to gain some powers, 'nine lays of power', from Mimir. However, this was not being offered to him on a plate (or in a drinking horn); Odin was engaged on an initiatory path, and he had tasks to complete, obstacles to overcome, tricks and talents he needed to display. And they started with his encounter with Mimir.

Mimir's well was under the root of the World Tree, a setting so

ancient as to be timeless.¹⁴ Sometimes it is referred to as a spring, so the soft, trickling sound of water pouring from the depths might be all that one could hear of it: melodious and peaceful. But Mimir conjures a more noisy image. As a giant he must have been huge, much larger than Odin: giants were tall as huge oaks, feet splaying yards across the ground, heads sometimes ethereal-looking as they stuck up into the clouds.

Some of the giants were good-natured, but if provoked, the giants of legend could be very dangerous. In rage they uprooted trees, hurled rocks, and squeezed water out of stones. Mimir would have had no trouble crushing Odin in his fist if he wished. So when Odin arrived at Mimir's well, he must have had to gather all his courage even to begin negotiations. His ultimate quest was to obtain a drink of the mead of inspiration, the drink that enabled the drinker to speak the poetry of ultimate truth, to be the knower of Wyrd.

But in describing what happens next, I also need to provide a bit of a plot summary.

Odin 'knew' that if he asked for a drink of mead, in his identity as Odin, then he would not get any. He was expected to earn it, and to use his wits to obtain the drink.¹⁵ So he decided that he had to appear to Mimir not as someone who was seeking knowledge, but as an amiable traveller, a guileless companion. In a piece of sacred text called *Grimnismal*, Odin says: 'I was called Svithurr and Svithrir at Mimir's, when I fooled the old giant and single-handed became the death of that famous son of Meadwolf' (i.e. Mimir).

Odin's 'disguise' names of Svithurr and Svithrir are etymologically the same as a character in one of the sagas who was a noted heavy drinker. So the lines tell us that Odin lurched into the vicinity of Mimir's well pretending to be a drinker who merely and innocently wanted a swig of mead, rather than an initiate intending to drink it in pursuit of shamanic inspiration.

But it turned out that Mimir does not, after all, have the magic mead. Other sources explain that the mead was originally in the hands of Mimir's father (the Meadwolf), but is now kept under guard in a place called Okolnir, a region of fire and flame where the Fire Giant Surt lives. Surer, and his fiery comrades, now have possession of the

magic mead. But although Mimir does not have the mead, he does have the magic spells by which Odin might journey in search of it. And before Odin could journey in quest of a drink of the mead he had to obtain the 'nine lays' from Mimir.

So what happened between them?

— Odin Pledges an Eye —

Snorri Sturluson quotes the lines of the ancient poem called *Sybil's Vision*:

I know it all, Odin,
where you hid your eye
deep in the wide-famed
well of Mimir;
every morning does Mimir drink
mead from Allfather's pledge . . .¹⁶

And Snorri tells us that, 'All-father [Odin] came there and asked for a single drink from the spring, but he did not get it until he had given of his eye as a pledge.' So Odin pledges to the giant Mimir one of his eyes, which is to be put in Mimir's well, and forms some sort of deal which allows Mimir to drink the mead every morning and, in return, enables Odin to learn the 'nine lays of power'.

Odin's giving up of an eye is a gravely serious pledge, of course, horrifying and gruesome in its literal sense. What is he gaining? Giving up an eye is an intriguing pledge. Our two eyes, used together, provide perspective. The Vikings would have been well aware of this. There were plenty of eye injuries in those times – farming, hunting accidents, as well as combat injuries, and in a practical craft society, it would have been noted that people with only one eye have an impaired sense of perspective. Odin, embarking on a dangerous quest, is nevertheless prepared to give up an eye, and is thereby handicapping himself in his ability to accomplish certain practical tasks.

Why should he accept the loss, unless he is aware of the advantages? Certainly in modern Western society, sight is the primary mode of sense that we employ in maintaining our everyday sense of 'reality' –

the waking state of consciousness. Under altered states such as meditation or hypnosis, drug-induced, other senses come into more prominence, and sight of the material world may be a minor or even absent factor. So one way of regarding Odin's sacrifice, his pledge, is that in giving up an eye on his way to initiation, Odin is making an investment in altered reality.

Odin's act of sacrifice has survived in the practices of more recent shamanic cultures where the pledging of body parts is in the service of a death-and-rebirth initiatory remaking into a shaman's body. However these pledges, while marked by physical ordeals, are metaphorical and have a psychological rather than physical grounding.

Eliade quotes fieldwork observations which testify that during the Araucanian shaman's consecration festival the shamans were seen to tear off their noses or tear out their eyes. He makes it clear that he considers this to have been an act of illusion: 'The initiator made the profane audience believe that he tore out his tongue and eyes and exchanged them with those of the initiate.'¹⁷ So the initiator, the shaman with the knowledge, exchanges his eyes with those of the neophyte, so that the apprentice will have the ability to see as a shaman sees, in the spirit world. We have no indication that Mimir exchanged eyes with Odin, but he did something even more dramatic, and of greater import: Mimir gave Odin his head. Or rather, Odin won Mimir's head in a bizarre ritual.

— The Beheading Game —

In the *Verse Edda*, the seeress says:

Shrilly shrieked Heimdall's
horn across the sky;
Odin whispers
with the head of Mimir . . .¹⁸

And we know from other sources that these lines refer to an astounding ritual whereby Odin cuts off Mimir's head. So how did the beheading come about? And how could it be that Odin cut off Mimir's head and 'become the death of him' against an opponent so

many times his size? We have no more details about the actual incident, but a story from the Celtic tribespeople of ancient Ireland sets the scene for understanding the beheading of Mimir.

In the Irish tale of the *Feast of Bricriu*, there is described the 'game of the beheaded man'.¹⁹ Three mighty Irish warriors, called Cu Chulainn, Loegaire and Conall, were quarrelling over which of them should be accorded the title of 'hero', an accolade to be given to the bravest of the three. Finally the warriors went for a judgement from Uath Mac Immonain (the 'Terrible Son of Great Fear'), a wild and formidable giant, who said to them, 'I have an axe. Let one of you take it in your hand and cut off my head today, and I shall cut off his head tomorrow.' Horrified, Conall and Loegaire refused to accept this deal. But Cu Chulainn agreed.

'After pronouncing an incantation over the blade of his axe, Uath laid his head on the stone before Cu Chulainn, who took the weapon and cut off his head. Then Uath left and dived into the lake, holding his axe in one hand and his head against his chest with the other.' When, the following day, Cu Chulainn came as arranged and laid his head on the stone, Uath, who appeared to be as well as ever, was content to brandish his axe three times over the neck and back of the hero, declaring him worthy of the honour he claimed.

This beheading 'game', a test of bravery, is testimony to the fact that the heroes believe that they will not die from the beheading. Uath was able to walk and be alive even after losing his head. Losing his head did not literally kill him, though it might have been formally called a 'death'. He was able to return the next day with his head fixed back on to his body, 'reborn'. There is a kind of mutual sacrifice, but it ends in a symbolic gesture rather than a literal beheading.

In this story, the giant Uath was dealing with warriors competing for bravery, rather than a shaman looking for a drink of magic mead. But it seems likely that Odin would have to prove himself in his Otherworld quest, and since he was a warrior before entering this quest, he is well equipped. In a line of poetry Odin is referred to in the following terms: 'He stood on the cliff with Brimir's sword . . . then Mimir's head spoke.'²⁰ I shall explain shortly how this refers to the moment at which Odin had cut off Mimir's head. 'Brimir' refers

to a sword with special powers: another manuscript tells us of 'Brimir best of swords'.

So Odin has a special sword, the 'best of swords', which he has obtained from the fire giants, and it seems likely that in beheading Mimir he cheated the giant: 'I fooled that giant and killed him.' If the giant Mimir played the beheading game with Odin, as a test of his bravery, and allowed Odin to strike the first blow as in the Irish story above, perhaps Odin's use of the special sword meant that the giant could not put his head back on. As I describe below, Odin kept the head, and it spoke to him, telling him nine lays of power and many secrets.

If we turn to another Celtic story, from the ancient Welsh narratives, representing the British tradition before the separation of the Bretons, we see that the second section of the document called the *Mabinogion* is about a severed head. The story concerns the prominent mythological figure called Bran the Blessed.

The French scholar of Celtic mythology, Jean Markale, relates a story²¹ which concerns an expedition mounted to Ireland by Bran and the British to avenge an injury to his sister Branwen and to recover a magic cauldron that brings the dead back to life. The expedition struck disaster, as in battle Bran was wounded in the foot by a poisoned spear. He asked the seven surviving Britons to cut off his head and carry it with them, which they did. Together with Branwen, they reached Haddleck, where they settled. 'They began to lay in a wealth of food and drink and consume it. Three birds came to sing them a song, which made other birds they had heard seem dull. This meal lasted for seven years, at the end of which they left for Gwales in Penvro.'

There they stayed in a great hall with the head of Bran fully displayed. 'They remembered nothing of all the suffering they had seen and all they had experienced, nor of any pain in the world; they stayed for twenty-four years and it seemed to them the best and most agreeable time in all their lives. They felt no more tiredness and none of them could see that the others had aged at all since the time they had arrived.'

After the twenty-four years had elapsed, they opened a door and immediately their memories returned along with their tiredness and

sufferings, and they went to carry out Bran's last wish that his head should be buried in the White Hill in London.

In this story, the Britons have failed to recover the magic cauldron which brings the dead back to life, and Bran's head, offered to the men, provides a stopping of time. The men do not age. They experience good cheer and food and no pain. So the head brought healing. And peace and plenty. But primarily, the stopping of time.

But beyond this, we need to consider how it was that the head could bring eternal life. To understand the significance of this act about the head, we need to consider first the concept of the soul among the peoples of Wyrd; as I explained earlier, among the tribes-people of ancient Europe the head was considered to be the seat of procreation, of life force.

Connecting the head and life-soul with procreation also explains the custom constantly alluded to in *Beowulf*: the head contained the life and life-soul, so that men who defended themselves were said to 'guard their heads'. The helmet or 'head-protector' is referred to simply as 'the boar'. It is 'the boar, the head-sign'. 'The boar kept ward.' This seems to mean that the head was committed uniquely to the protection of the god of procreation and fertility, Freyr, whose emblem the boar was.²²

Also it is the head that matters in battle. Wiglaf 'bears his war-head to help his lord'. When Beowulf and the dragon have slain each other and are lying dead, Wiglaf 'keepeth guard over the heads of friend and foe'. It is the head that goes to the Norse Realm of Death. So in old Germanic belief the soul which survives death was located in the head.²³ This was the seat of death and rebirth, for it was the fertile, vital aspect which survived physical death.

For many tribal groupings, such as the Angles, Saxons, and Norsemen, freedom was a condition of the procreative element, and explains why Angles and Saxons used the expression 'heofod ninam', 'to take [his] head'. While one who surrendered himself thus into the power of another was said by the Norsemen 'to bring his head to one'.

From this we might adduce that the beheading game was one in which the two protagonists 'surrendered their heads' to the other, gave themselves into each other's power, absolutely, in a form of

bonding. To make oneself so vulnerable as to have one's head chopped off by an 'adversary', on the understanding that it can be put back on again, is a truly remarkable level of trust. It must be akin to the notion of 'blood brothers' which has survived into modern culture. This latter contains no hint of rebirth, but rather the notion that self-inflicted wounds can lead to a sharing of blood in a bonding ritual. In more recent times it refers to a very close 'brother' relationship between men, without necessarily having the physical ritual played out.

But this is not the same thing as having the brain, or even the mind, in the head. Rather it is a function of the person's very identity. Who he or she is. The personal presence. When we 'capture' someone for a position in business, a position for which the person is highly prized, they have been 'head-hunted'. Not for their brain only, but for their very being. When a person is fired from a job, they 'get the chop'. And when our sense of our life force is exaggerated, blown up, we have become 'big-headed'. And the leader of an organisation, the person who represents it, runs it, expresses its life force, is its 'head'.

If we follow the points above about the head being the seat of the soul, the focus of the procreative juices that guarantee fertility, rebirth, then to take one's head is to take that element of a person which will be reborn. And so to play a game in which one allows one's 'antagonist' to take one's head and then to do the reverse is to pledge oneself to another for ever. Literally. And this is what Odin did with Mimir.

Finally, one more perspective rounds out the picture. For if the life force of a person resides in the head, then the taking of that head adduces the power of the person to the taker. In the Native American tradition of 'scalping' slain enemies, and the hunting tradition of keeping tails and so on as trophies, there is a strong element of this belief. It is not just a count of success, it is a taking of that power for oneself. And if the Anglo-Saxons believed in a spiritual soul-matter which pervades the whole body but is concentrated in the head, a soul-matter which maintains all life, 'then the taking of a head brings also the effectiveness of the soul-matter to the taker and his people. This is in effect what happens when Odin takes Mimir's head and uses its wisdom for his and the Aesirs' good.'²⁴

Odin 'captured' Mimir's head; this was an act of sabotage, but an act expected of him, for he was engaged in a quest for knowledge. For this he had to fight. And in fooling Mimir, he gained for himself the wisdom of Mimir (as we shall see shortly).

This is a rather complex analysis, necessarily so, for we are dealing here with aspects of the beliefs of our ancestors which are embedded in many threads of the web of Wyrd. A lot of it seems to me to be about risk, commitment, and the juices of life. The most satisfying forces in one's life are self-rewarding; they increase vitality, life force, energy.

Indeed a much more common term that has survived in modern Western parlance refers to the taking of a risk as 'sticking one's neck out'. Often it refers to the making of a risky statement, or judgement; the declaring of a viewpoint which might be proven wrong or unpopular, and therefore leaves one's neck vulnerable to 'the chop'. And yet in the making of these statements, we are expressing our selves, our true beliefs; it is saying what we think even if to do so involves risk. So the sticking out of one's neck is an act of self-validation.

It is the truest way to fulfil our personal destiny. The shaman underwent physical death and rebirth, and here, in the ritual of Odin and Mimir, we can see that death and rebirth involved cutting off the head, the point of vital flow of life force, and then putting it back on again.

But the important point for us today is that the principle is provocative: to live 'near the edge', to be aware of the boundaries of experience, of sticking one's neck out, encourages the person to live to the full. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries, but to test them was, and is, a test of one's commitment. Awareness of death introduces one to the fullness of life.

But in holding back in safe areas, of being cautious so as not to invite the 'chop', we miss out. For then we have not affirmed what Odin and Mimir and Bran were affirming in their game: that psychologically and spiritually at least, and physically if we are a god, we can die and be reborn – a psychological death is not the end of life. It is an opportunity for rebirth. At the end of a bloodthirsty chapter, I find that a comforting and encouraging message.

— How the Head Spoke —

Let us return to the story briefly and consider how Odin deals with Mimir's head, the head he has cut off. First we are told that he carefully preserves it with the use of herbs and incantations. So if Odin consulted Mimir's head at the time of his initiation, what did it say? And how did the ritual work?

Odin's consulting of the preserved head of Mimir suggests the Yukagir method of divination by the skulls of ancestral shamans.²⁵ Until the last century in this culture the skulls of dead shamans were still venerated; each was set in a wooden figurine, which was kept in a box. Nothing was undertaken without recourse to divination by these skulls. The method most usual in the Arctic was employed: if the skull seems light to the diviner when he questions it, the answer is 'yes', if heavy, 'no'. And the oracle's answer must be obeyed to the letter.

But there is evidence in the sacred poetry that Odin did something rather different with Mimir's head in the following lines: 'Hroptr read them [the runes of wisdom], cut them and thought them out from the lees which had leaked out of Hethdraupnir's skull and out of Hoddrofnir's horn.' Hroptr means 'the sage', and refers to Odin. Brian Branston identifies the names Hethdraupnir (Clear-Dripper) and Hoddrofnir (Treasurer-Opener) as nicknames referring to Mimir.²⁶

So this piece of poetry says that Odin, in his sage guise, reads the runes of wisdom, carves them into wood staves, and thinks them through so he understands them, and obtains these patterns from the clear-dripping, treasure-opening shape and quality of the water (lees?) which drips from Mimir's skull and out of his horn.

The head leaks and tells Odin the shape of runes, in the form of nine mighty lays, or spells. These are the spells he must use to obtain a drink of the mead as inspiration which will transform him into a spell-singing shaman.

— The Significance of Mimir —

The name Mimir means 'memory, remembrance, mindfulness'. The stories of ancient sacred literature refer not only to universal scenarios, but can also be read as referring to individual ones which are a microcosm of the whole. As when we consider the significance of a dream, the various 'characters' in the drama represent aspects of the protagonist. In this case, Mimir is an aspect of Odin. What does this tell us?

Clearly in terms of individual sacred psychology, Odin's encounters with Mimir are direct dealings with the collective unconscious. He is negotiating with material which is 'memory' and 'remembrance' of the human species, shared among all peoples and preserved in all subtleties of cultural forms. In psychological terms, the memory is 'inside us', but so deep that it is inaccessible to the conscious mind. These ancient and deep images come to us only in deep dreams (not everyday wish-fulfilment dreams, or those night images playing out the psychological dynamics of our social relationships and personal obsessions and insecurities). Messages from the collective unconscious cannot be recalled at will. Unless, that is, a deal is done, a ritual performed, a kind of inner journey undergone as in Odin's dropping down to the hidden roots of the World Tree to encounter a giant from the primeval past.

Odin's initiatory ordeal on the World Tree, in which he fasted for nine days and nine nights, was such a ritual; it enabled him to reach those secret primeval layers of psychic experience which are the reward of such deep voyages. In claiming archetypal memories in coded runic form (Mimir's head speaking), Odin has had to let go of some of the connection with everyday consensual reality. He will never again see things in a 'normal', socially sanctioned framework. The ritual encounters with Mimir are a transcending of the gulf between everyday reality and the deepest of inner knowledge. To maintain that bridge, Odin braved possible psychological death: the severing of his 'head'. Today, someone dipping into temporary insanity is sometimes spoken of as having 'lost his head'.

Odin did not get away with Mimir's head without having to make the compensatory gesture where he pledged to Mimir one of his own

eyes, the eye of 'normal perspective'. The eye was to be submerged in Mimir's well and left there. So that while Mimir's head was helping Odin to see, so Odin's eye was helping the headless Mimir to see. It is a ritualistic bonding, a way of exchanging virtue, of balancing the powers, and of maintaining a deeply imaginative vision even as one lives partly in the 'normal world'.

Shamans, mystics, archetypal psychic voyagers such as Odin go further than the rest of us. We are not meant to take such drastic steps; nine-day fasts are not advisable psychologically and certainly not physically, even with a doctor's certificate for vigorous sporting activity. But just as Olympic athletes can run faster than the rest of us, we can all run, nevertheless. Understanding the point and appreciating the sacrifice of Odin's encounters with Mimir can provide us with a glimpse of the sacred potential for gaining inner knowledge; even if we cannot get to that level, we can all go part of the way. But this shamanic journeying into the mysteries of Wyrd is for supervised experience only.

— Our Own 'Talking Heads' Ritual —

The image of a severed head being used as an oracle of wisdom is a deep and somewhat disturbing one to us, a ritual form from the ancient culture of our ancestors; one that we may learn something from, but perhaps not one that we would wish to emulate literally. Except that it is amusing and instructive to acknowledge the ways in which we do something similar. In the Western world the television news as a source of information delivered from 'severed', or at least disembodied heads, is very widespread. And frequently politicians or other opinion-makers are interviewed with just their head, or head and shoulders, showing.

The people to whom the heads belong are often famous, and listened to regularly but are not known personally to the people watching the set. Their opinions have influence, and often more so *because* they are on television. And when politicians, in particular, are preparing speeches that they know will be transmitted from their disembodied heads oracular-style on television, they often prepare

their words in 'sound-bites', a special language of significance for the disembodied head ritual that millions of people participate in each evening. Television producers even refer to these sort of broadcasts as 'talking heads' programmes. An anthropologist from another planet observing the flickering image of the disembodied heads on television sets in the West might speculate on the occult significance of the talking head in contemporary society!